

 TECH & ALGORITHMS

# How the Feed Is Built to Keep Them Scrolling

By the DSK Research Team · June 2026

No child sits down and decides to spend three hours scrolling. The feed is engineered — by teams of engineers and researchers, using the same behavioral psychology techniques as slot machines — to make stopping feel harder than continuing. Understanding how that engineering works is the first step to pushing back on it.

## Variable Reward

is the technical name for the psychological mechanism behind infinite scroll and autoplay — the same principle that makes slot machines addictive. It is not an accident of design; it is the design.

### Three Design Patterns Every Parent Should Recognize

**Infinite scroll** removes every natural stopping point a piece of media used to have. There is no "end of the newspaper" moment — the feed simply continues, and continuing requires zero effort while stopping requires an active decision.

**Autoplay** extends that same logic to video: the next clip starts before a child has consciously chosen to watch it, turning "watch one video" into "watch forty" without a single deliberate choice in between.

**Variable-ratio recommendation** means the algorithm doesn't show good content on a predictable schedule — it mixes in occasional highly engaging, highly stimulating posts unpredictably, the same reward structure that makes gambling machines compelling. The brain keeps scrolling in anticipation of the next one.

### The Research Companies Didn't Want Public

In 2021, internal research from Meta became public through congressional testimony and reporting, showing the company's own studies had found that Instagram's content made body-image issues worse for a meaningful share of teenage girls who already struggled with them — and that the company was aware of

these findings well before they became public. It was a rare, concrete look at what platforms already know internally about the emotional effects of their own algorithms.

#### SIGNS THE ALGORITHM MAY BE DOING HARM

Mood noticeably worsens during or right after phone use. Increasing comparison talk about appearance, bodies, or lifestyle. Difficulty stopping even when they say they want to. Sleep loss tied to "just five more minutes" that becomes an hour.

## Why "Just Limit Screen Time" Isn't Enough

Screen time limits address quantity, not what the algorithm is optimizing for. A child can hit a two-hour limit and still have spent that time in a content spiral that's actively harmful — extreme fitness content, appearance comparison, doomscrolling. The design of the feed matters as much as the clock.

*"You cannot out-discipline a system that has thousands of engineers optimizing for your attention. The realistic goal isn't perfect self-control — it's giving your child the tools and the awareness to notice when the feed is steering them somewhere unhealthy." — DSK Research Team*

## What Actually Helps

- **Turn off autoplay** in each app's settings — it restores the natural stopping point that infinite scroll removed.
- **"Reset" the algorithm together** — most platforms let you clear watch/like history or mark content "not interested," which retrains recommendations over a few days.
- **Curate who they follow**, not just how long they scroll — a feed of accounts that make a child feel worse is a bigger problem than ten extra minutes of screen time.
- **Name the mechanism out loud** — kids who understand that the feed is designed to be hard to stop are measurably better at noticing when it's happening to them.
- Keep devices out of bedrooms overnight — most compulsive-use spirals happen in the unsupervised, unstructured hours before sleep.

#### THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO

Ask, regularly and without judgment: "How does your feed make you feel lately?" Not "how much time did you spend" — how it feels. That question opens a door that screen-time reports never do.

## Resources

- Common Sense Media — device and app-specific setup guides
- DSK Family Safety Audit: [digitalsafetyknights.org/audit.html](https://digitalsafetyknights.org/audit.html)

- DSK Emergency Help: [digitalsafetyknights.org](https://digitalsafetyknights.org)